

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered Students: Perceived Social Support in the High School Environment

By Corrine Munoz-Plaza, MPH

Principal Research Associate, National Development and Research Institutes

Sandra Crouse Quinn, Ph.D

**Associate Dean for Student Affairs and Education, Associate Professor
Department of Behavioral and Community Health Sciences
Graduate School of Public Health, University of Pittsburgh**

and Kathleen Rounds, Ph.D

Professor, UNC School of Social Work

Presentation developed by Anna Scheyett, MSW

LGBT Youth: A Vulnerable Population

- **Stressful developmental challenges in homophobic society**
- **Lacking many supports available to heterosexual peers** (Gonsiorek, 1988)
- **High homophobia in classroom** (Elia, 1993)
- **Limited research exists specific to LGBT youth**

LGBT Youth: Health Status

- **Suicide** (US DHHS, 1989)
 - #1 cause of death in LGBT youth
 - 2-6 times higher rate than heterosexual peers
 - 30% of all teen suicides
- **High substance abuse: One study of gay/bisexual males found 76% used alcohol, 25% used cocaine** (Rotheram-Borus, et al., 1994)

LGBT Youth: Health Status

- **As many as 42% of runaways are LGBT** (Victim Services, 1991)
- **33%-49% of LGBT junior high and high school students report harassment, threats, or violence** (Herek & Berrill, 1992)

In This Study (Munoz-Plaza, Quinn, & Rounds, 2002)

- **12 LGBT participants, 18-21 year old**
 - 7 women, 5 men
 - 9 Caucasian, 2 African-American, 1 Asian American
 - 3 lesbian women, 3 bisexual women, 1 undecided woman, 4 gay men, 1 bisexual man
- **Confidential 90 minute interview with standardized questions on types of support available to participants when they were high school students**
- **Transcribed and qualitative analysis completed**

Types of Support Reported

- 4 types of support behaviors: emotional, appraisal, instrumental, informational (House, 1981)
- Participants reported peers and non-family adults more supportive than family
- Heterosexual peers/non-family provided emotional and instrumental support
- LGBT peers/non-family provided all 4 types of support
- Emotional support from heterosexual peers and non-family limited

Emerging Identity and Support

- Sense of being different and alienated
- Confusion about feelings around sexual identity
- Sexual identity more fluid rather than exclusively heterosexual or LGBT
- Identity formation process characterized by varying degrees and stages of denial and acceptance

Stages of Homosexual Identity Formation

(Troiden, 1989)

- **Sensitization**
 - awareness of being different
- **Identity Confusion**
 - inner turmoil as one acknowledges one's sexual identity
- **Identity Assumption**
 - coming to self-identify as LGBT
- **Commitment**
 - full comfort and acceptance of sexual identity

“Coming Out” and Support

- Identified barriers to disclosure
 - fear of rejection
 - fear of unfair treatment by faculty
 - fear of being thought a sexual predator
 - fear of harassment
- Homophobic messages in school
- Observed discrimination against other LGBT students/faculty
- Internalized homophobia
- Not far along in LGBT identity development

Process of Disclosure

- Ranged from participants who told no one to those who reported their sexual identity was common knowledge
- Disclosure easier if participant knew other LGBT individuals
- To whom did participants disclose
 - select peers most frequently
 - select teachers
 - only one participant disclosed to parent

Disclosure

- **Styles of disclosure**
 - direct
 - one participant wrote about his identity in a term paper
 - putting out “feelers” for safety
- **Reactions to disclosure**
 - since most participants selective in disclosure, most reactions fairly positive
 - parental reaction was negative
 - some negative reactions from peers, teachers

Study Limitations

- **Homogeneous population**
 - 11/12 university students
- **No transgendered individuals in study**
- **Retrospective**

Implications for Practice: School Environment

- Schools can increase awareness and sensitivity
 - display LGBT information throughout campus
 - “no tolerance’ of harassment
 - include sexual orientation in non-discrimination policy
 - celebrate diversity events
 - support LGBT teachers as visible mentors and role models

Implications for Practice: Education Content

- For teachers and school professionals
 - training on LGBT issues
 - required sensitivity training
- For students
 - expand health curriculum to include LGBT issues other than HIV/AIDS
 - include LGBT topics in curriculum--civil rights, LGBT artists, etc.

Implications for Practice: Services

- Establish and support LGBT/straight alliances at school
- Offer confidential counseling by individual qualified and trained in LGBT content
- Ensure health services and health information addresses LGBT issues

References

- Elia, J. (1993). Homophobia in the high school: A problem in need of resolution. *The High School Journal*, 77(1-2), 177-185.
- Gonsiorek, J. (1988). Mental health issues of gay and lesbian adolescents. *Journal of Adolescent Health Care*, 9, 114-122.
- Herek, G. & Berrill, K. (Eds.) (1992). *Hate crimes: Confronting violence against lesbian and gay men*. Newbury Park & London: Sage Publications.
- House, J. (1981). *Work stress and social support*. Reading, MA: Addison Wesley Publishing Co.
- Munoz-Plaza, C., Quinn, S., Rounds, K. (2002). Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered students: Perceived social support in the high school environment. *The High School Journal*, April-May, 52-63.

References

- Rotheram-Borus, M., Rosaric, M., Meyer-Bahlburg, H., Koopman, C., Dopkins, S., & Davies, M. (1994). Sexual and substance use acts of gay and bisexual male adolescents in New York City. *Journal of Sex Research, 31*, 47-57.
- Troiden, R. (1989). The formation of homosexual identities. *Journal of Homosexuality, 17*(1-2), 43-73.
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (1989). *Report to the Secretary;s task force on youth suicide*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- Victim Services/Traveler's Aid. (1991). *Streetwork Project study*. New York: Victim Services.